

JOB BURNOUT RECOVERY

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Job burnout, the result of suffering a demanding, persistent pattern of occupational stress involving exhaustion and feelings of meaninglessness and cynicism has been the subject of academic research since the early 1970s. Research on job burnout established that burnout affects people in different ways and that symptoms and effects are not consistent and can be many and varied, which makes empirical study difficult.

Because interventions have come out of theoretical models rather than being driven by the experience of burnout sufferers' patterns of recovery, job burnout recovery has been considered a simple outcome rather than a complex phenomenon to be studied and treated with an informed sensitivity and mined for possible strengths granted by burnout and recovery. Little focus has been given to the experience of successful burnout recovery, which could offer researchers a missing link in thoughtful intervention creation and pragmatic resources for clinicians in treatment planning.

The lens used in the study of burnout recovery has been largely limited to a social, organizational lens utilizing a mechanistic focus that leaves out a complex view of the way people deal with extreme occupational stress. This project design was influenced by transpersonal psychology and as a result considered job burnout and the burnout recovery experience with a whole-person lens incorporating experiential, spiritual components of meaning-making, growth, self-discovery, and transformation into the analysis.

The primary purpose of this study was to discover themes in participants' subjective experience of successful job burnout recovery in two ways. First, it sought to determine if there are specific strategies, processes, and situational or personal elements that accompany successful job burnout recovery. Second, this study sought to identify shifts (if any) in participants' sense of meaning or spirituality as a result of their burnout and recovery process. A purposive sample of 21 people between the ages of 25 and 54 who had suffered from job burnout and recovered successfully within the last five years, as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory, was selected. Those participants who had a score on the Maslach Burnout Inventory that qualified their self-identified job burnout experience and that showed them to now be recovered from burnout were interviewed. Interviews were conducted in person and over the phone, transcribed, and analyzed using a thematic analysis procedure.

Burnout recovery themes were identified in successful strategies used, situational and personal factors, the experience of the recovery process, and shifts in participant meaning attributed to work. Eleven strategy themes were identified by participants (asserting boundaries, leaving the job, having an interim job, assuming accountability, taking time off work, working on personal business, confronting a supervisor, reducing workload, remembering past success, utilizing medication and requesting help at work). Participants reported that recovery was influenced by fifteen situational and personal themes (support, sense of control, perspective gain, relationship change, success experienced, sense of agency, ability to make choices, increased confidence, self-care, identity change, learned about personal values, appreciation, not having a boss, geographic move and being fired). Recovery was found to be a process that was ongoing, changed with, and was made possible with time. Process themes dealt with reflection, time, transition and space created. Significant shifts in participant sense of meaning were discovered in participants' returning to personal meaning, finding meaning in helping others, making a contribution, feeling valued and having control over their work.

This research considered strategic, situational, process and meaning elements of burnout recovery and how they relate to each other in order to come up with the five findings that it is hoped will be helpful to burnout sufferers, those supporting them and burnout recoverees who are attempting to make sense of their experience. The data in this study suggest that the burnout recovery experience involves 1) a recovery process, 2) relationship change, 3) a sense of empowerment, 4) an increase in self-referencing, and 5) an existential shift. The findings of this research suggest that the chronic distress that is experienced through burnout can turn into a kind of positive precursor for growth.

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